Views On Recent French Protests

The Final Straw Radio - April 16, 2023



Here's a chat we just had with 4 radicals in France. Rather than introduce them, I'll let them do that themselves. We talk about the recent protests and riots in France concerning reforms to the pension system that would push back the age of retirement and increase the amount of years someone has to work in order to retire, the legal manipulation by Macron's neoliberal government to get it passed, the composition of the demos, the recent ecological demonstrations violently repressed in Sainte-Soline, police violence more widely, Darmanin's upcoming immigration and asylum law, antifascists in Lyon, work and austerity.

The conversation is a bit informal and though we cover a lot there is so much more to talk about. For folks who want to learn more, I suggest checking out recent articles on the protests by crimethinc and a recent video from Unicorn Riot and a transcript will be available soon.

Search for this interview title at https://thefinalstrawradio. noblogs.org/ to find links to further resources on this topic, featured music, the audio version, and files for printing copies of this episode.

Iz: Hey, I'm Iz, I'm French, I'm 35 [years old]. I lived abroad for a long time and I just came back to France in January right before the reform was announced. And I've been participating in the movement since.

Guéric: I'm Guéric, I'm 34 [years old]. I am a French student, my pronouns are he/him, and I'm currently in Paris. I have been studying here for I don't know, three or four or five years. I don't even remember. I'm not originally from Paris but I'm, basically, French.

Guiseppe: Hi I'm Gisueppe, my pronouns are he/him. I'm Italian, but I normally live in New York, and I'm here in Paris for a few months studying as well.

David: My name is David Campbell. I'm 35, I'm American, and I've been living in France, in Paris, for about a year and a half.

TFSR: Listeners may be familiar with David, we had a chat a couple of years ago about supporting antifascist prisoners and about David:'s experience. So thanks for coming on, all of you, and thanks for returning, David.

David: Yeah, good to be here.

TFSR: I was hoping to have you all on to talk about some of these massive protests that I've been seeing articles about and little bits of amazing inflammatory videos on social media. But I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about these demonstrations that have been going on for the last three months. What they're in response to, in terms of the, here's the embarrassing part [pronounces with a French accent] Reforme de Retraite.

David: We got a lot of silent e's on the ends of words in French. If you've studied Spanish, it's kind of a red herring.

TFSR: Yeah, it's kind of a poke in the eye. Can you talk about these reforms and who it impacts and how?

Iz: For me, the one thing that's important is that it's not the first reform of the retirement system. I think there's been eight reforms in the past three years. In the 80's there was a reform that made it so that people could retire at age 60, it was 65 before that. After that, it just kept going up. So since 2010, the legal age that you can retire in France was 62. The current reform wants to make it 64 years old, and that's after working 43 years. So if you want full retirement, you need to be 64 years old, and to have worked for 43 years.

This affects all workers, but it really has deeper issues for some workers. For example, women who tend to have interrupted careers and usually already go on retirement about a year later than men because of that. So it really impacts them and it impacts people whose jobs are physically demanding. There's a lot of jobs where it's hard to imagine that you're going to be able to do that job until 64 years

old. Then there's the typical liberal response that says, "Well, people can change careers and you don't have to keep the same job your whole life." But some people do want to keep their job the whole life. Actually a lot of French workers still think of their career as one job that they keep. So for me, those are going to be people that are going to be affected the most by the reform.

Guéric: It follows a series of reforms that took place in the past and always in this objective to push back the legal age of retirement. The press, everybody focused on that point. But what is even trickier is that the legal age would increase from 62 to 64, but to have a complete pension, to not have a reduced pension is not based on the legal age of retirement, but on the number of years you worked.

David: Everyone I know does, like, four different things. I don't know about you.

Guéric: Exactly, exactly.

Guiseppe: If I can add something, I like the emphasis on the trajectory of the fact that this is not a new thing. This is a long process that has been going on for decades, pushing the age of retirement. Before we recorded we were chatting about Italy, there's other countries in Europe too. And there's a tendency in the whole European continent at pushing. They may start discussing measures to make a uniform rule, and the number that they were looking at was 67, which is what it is in Italy right now. Italy and France are similar. In Italy, the cost of the pensions, I was reading, is 16% of the GDP and in France is 14%. They have a similar trajectory also, demographically, which is what people like [President] Macron say, "The people are aging, it is an inexpensive welfare measure, and someone has to pay for it. It's gonna have to be the workers."

What's interesting in looking at it as a long trajectory, is that is not a new problem. We know that life is changing, that the conditions of workers are not the same as they were before. Life is getting longer. It's always remarkable for me that the answer is always the same. It's always putting more weight, more work, really, on the shoulders of the workers. This is why I like, for example, that one of the slogans of the protesters is that the age was 62 is going to be pushed to 64 by 2030, but they're saying, "No, let's, let's bring it back to 60."

And that's exactly the point because it's not just about reducing damage and keeping where it is, but trying to say that we need to figure out a completely new way. This trajectory in which we have been on is clearly not serving us. If we go on like this, then next year, 67, and then 70, and whatever, and we're gonna die as we work.

So thank you for putting the emphasis on that, because I think it's really the crucial issue. It points to the fact that in looking at these reforms, actually, we have to rethink the whole system and accept that conditions are changing. So we should radically rethink the way that things are done.

David: I love the pushback, it touches on a lot of questions about the future of work more generally. This idea of universal basic income and stuff. "How do you

take care of people if AI takes a third of people's jobs?" These fears and these questions are waiting in the wings. I think it's all there for a lot of people. It's all related to pension reform, what the trajectory of people's work lives is gonna look like in the coming decades. I love that I've seen a lot of talk about how working class folks. I think a quarter of people, of impoverished workers in France die before 64. You see a lot of '64 years old is dead.' Is dead is a way to say, 'it sucks,' but also referring to the fact that a lot of people will be dead by that age. They will literally be working to death. That's the thing I've seen a lot, the working poor, a quarter of them will be dead by that age.

Iz: Also, in some jobs, the conditions are so difficult that by age 60 you already have a big amount of them that are on sick leave, and are ending their career on sick leave. For example, nurses, they say about a third of nurses are on sick leave by the time they reach their retirement. So really, we're gonna give them two years more when already they cannot make it until 62. It just doesn't make sense. It doesn't add up.

Guéric: I might add some things. I know I said it will impact everybody but we are not talking about the people who are not impacted by this reform and still have a lot of things to say, these people are already retirees.

David: That's very true. I mean, they're not happy about it, either.

Guéric: Yeah. And then certainly people who have the money to have private pensions and private ways to still get money when they retire, and that's not everybody, and especially not in France where we have this system, redistribution system. I think that's really dangerous, the trajectory you just described, because it pushes people to find other public ways to have a pension when they retire. But the thing is it will create more and more inequalities.

Iz: That's a really good point, I think. And it really is what Marcon wants and what those liberal...what they want. What they want is people to divest from the public pension system and invest in their own private retirement. Similar to what's happening in the US. So maybe for an American audience, they may think this is normal. I mean, when I was contributing to my retirement in the US, and it was private funds through my employer. Not in France. In France it's very much a public system based on redistribution and, you said, not everyone is able to do that. A lot of people are even thinking that they're doing it on purpose so that people divest from the public system to go to a private system, and then little by little it will become the norm. So that is also what people are fighting against.

TFSR: For me when I've talked to folks in the US about this, a lot of times people balj, "People retire at 62? That's crazy. Do you mean they have the end of their life to maybe have some health and live out?"

David: Yeah, but the US is not set up for living a long healthy life free of gun violence.

Iz: American people are proud to work 70 hours a week, and yeah, work until they die. French people are not like that, we like having our free time. We like having a nice little outdoor time with friends.

TFSR: Is there a different name for Stockholm syndrome when it affects a whole society? [before the chat I wasn't aware of the sexist implications of applications of the term "stockholm syndrome", so apologies for making light of this subject - Bursts]

David: That's a very good question.

Iz: The American dream?

[everyone laughs]

David: Yeah, so I mean, I don't mean to cut you off but that's a thing that I think about a lot, because I'm an American, I live over here and talk to my parents about the pension reform protests and stuff. I get that a lot. And it's like, my mom who's 65 and still working, she could retire, but she's like "Oh, I don't know what I would do. Come on French people, it's only two more years". I'm like, "Mom it's kind of not the point". I mean, it is partly the point but it's not really all of it. And then... who wants to work longer when there is money that is just in the wrong hands and it's not being distributed properly?

I think I've also talked to a lot of people at protests and stuff who take a very, "If you give them an inch, they'll take a mile?" Well, obviously, they don't say that because of the metric system [laughs], but they take that sort of attitude to it where it's like, you have to fight tooth and nail against all these attempts to carve away at what we do have.

TFSR: Yeah, and not to make this interview about the American perspective and explain to Americans, but because that's where the majority of our audience is...

I think that David brought up the "Well we're losing jobs to AI and automation" and there's two things, the "Why can't they just work harder? What's wrong with them? They're lazy." The counterpoint to that is obviously "Why are we being forced to work so hard for such shit wages?" But also, if we're able to automate portions and decrease the cost of production for various things that helps society run, why is there the presumption that the benefit of that just gets redistributed into the hands of the people that already have the money that own the companies? As opposed to towards the wider social betterment of society that... "Hey, everybody, guess what? We get to go home early?"

David: Yep. Yeah, that's the stuff that comes to mind for me and I'm interested in what the future is gonna bring. Just on a personal level it's something that I think is really exciting and really terrifying at the same time. The sort of stuff comes to mind

is...well, so you're saying it's going to be easier to get more stuff done, but we'll have to work longer and you'll take more of it. That doesn't really sound ideal.

Guiseppe: There was an interview that went far — not "far" that isn't quite right — but I think it was right after the use of the 49.3 — I'm sure we'll talk about that later — but Macron gave this interview to two journalists on TV and the way they was talking about this, he was saying, "Look, do you think I want to do this reform? I don't want to do these reform. We have to." So that's the idea, I think, as you were saying Giuseppe, the conditions of work are changing, we actually need less work to make things happen, but it turns out we still have to work more. But then there is an effort in saying stuff like "Look, I don't want to do this but we have to." To make it look like, because of heteronymous conditions like the fact that people are living longer, that this is the only way you. That there's no other way. That of course Marcon too, he hates doing this.

David: Yeah dude, ask your friends. Like, they have the money if you don't want to do it.

Guiseppe: And as you were saying, in fact, it's much more credible, rather, that there is a plan to actually change things and to make the private more prominent in things like pensions or health. But always that attempt at making it look like there's only one way possible?

David: "My hands are tied."

Iz: He said really often that it was unavoidable, that it was necessary, because there was just no other option. But there actually are a lot of other options. The main one being tax the rich, but that's my own preferred one. But one of your questions was about the other options and there are other options.

So there's this big idea that it's unavoidable but when you actually look into all of the reports about the future of the pension system in France, it shows that it's pretty stable. It's actually has more than enough money for this year, and for last year. The next few years it's going to be a slight deficit and then that's where they diverge. So Marcon says "By 2030 there will be a huge deficit", and other people are reading the same report and they're saying, "Actually, no, by 2030, it should even out, it should be working out".

There is really this incomprehension in French people right now, which is "Why are they trying so hard to push this reform based on one way of reading a report, when there are 10's of other ways of reading that same report and saying that the system is fine?" That is I think one of the main reasons why French people really reacted to that reform, is, "Why? We don't understand."

In the middle of the context of inflation, that is, I mean, it's really — I know in the US as well — but inflation here, I mean, everyone is saying it. Everyone goes to the supermarket and is paying so much more money. I know people who are not turning the heat on, reducing their water usage. I'm talking middle class people, everyone. Not just already poor working class, it's everyone is really feeling

this information. And then on top of that, you're going to put the reforms.

So everyone is to say, "Why?" Oh, yeah because they live in the castle up there and they just have no idea what we're going through. I really feel like this is feeding a lot of the anger right now, is this disconnect between those really rich Parisians in their castle and the rest of the population.

Guéric: They even say it's a strategy of necessary evil. Behind it, there's also the fact that the government, Marcon but his ministers as well, hid the fact that economically speaking, it's not a perfect reform. Pushing back two years means that there's going to be more people on sick leave-

Iz: -or unemployed.

David: It'd be more money paid out for people on unemployment and sick leave and stuff like that, cause-

Iz: -yeah, yes, absolutely. It doesn't make sense. You're gonna have more people on sick leave, more people who are unemployed, and so we're gonna give them money that we're taking so that they can work longer. It just doesn't add up.

David: I mean, honestly, so Macron is — especially maybe for people in the States that don't follow French politics that closely — Macron is a center right guy who was a banker, and became the finance minister, I believe, and then just catapulted to the presidency because the other option was Marine Le Pen, who's far right xenophobe who has been trying to her family's been trying to get the presidency for 40 years or something.

Macron is a banker at heart, and I think that he's done a really good job of trying to cover that up and be "I'm the nice guy, we're all in this together, big tent, we're keeping things on course, I don't want to do this". That all kind of tied together. I don't know if he always believed that or he's just starting to believe that but he gave this interview that was really bad about a week or two ago, and he was completely out of touch about the pension reform. He's like "I was elected on this platform. People voted for me because they liked my program". It's like, dude, people voted for you because they don't like Marine Le Pen. I think all that stuff is also in the air, people talk about that a lot. French Wall Street guy.

Iz: It's a really good point to bring that he was not elected for his program, he was elected so that Marine Le Pen would not be elected. Except that now he's saying "Well, the retirement age going up was part of my program and you elected me based on my program. So that means I can do it." And it's like, "No!"

David: Yeah, no. The other guy's program was "No more muslims."

TFSR: So I think there was a mention of, besides the protests in the streets, there has been a mention of at least the legislative pushback. And I wonder if you could talk a little bit about some of the organized responses to these

reforms from labor unions, and also maybe from oppositional parties, too, or other ministers, and how it actually got pushed through. Because that, I think, also inflamed even more people when they realized "Oh, this is even less democratic than we thought it was."

Iz: Totally. The reform was announced on January 10 and almost immediately, there was a big union response to it, which surprised me. I mean, I've been away from France for a long time but one of the main things that happened while I was away was the Gilets Jaunes, which was completely organic, completely out of labor unions. Labor unions seem to have really fallen out of favor. And then all of a sudden, I go to this march because my mom is old school, and she's like "Let's go to the march!"

David: The union march.

Iz: Yes, to the union march. I go to the union march with my mom, thinking there's gonna be 10 old people and that's gonna be it. And there were really a lot of people. And it was cold that day, I remember. Anyway, lots of people, the unions, which is really motivated, and the next march was even more people and the next march is even more people. And I'm in Marseille which is a very militant city, but then I'm hearing even in Paris, it's happening.

One thing that really surprised me was how calm those were compared to a lot of marches in the previous 10 years, where there was a lot of black blocs and riots and breaking banks or whatever. Those were really organized by the unions, you could tell. Which, I'm really not saying what's my favorite, it was [just] very

different from what I was expecting.

That lasted until the end of March and then at the end of March, the law was supposed to pass. And so there had to be a vote in Parliament, and Macron felt that he was not going to get the majority. So he used the legislative tool that's called the quarante-neuf trois, because it's article 49.3, which was designed to prevent the assembly from being completely immobilized. what can happen sometimes, for example, I think in Italy, you have that issue, sometimes, where things are just blocked because there isn't-

David: I'm sorry, I'm not quite [following].

TFSR: Like a tiebreaker.

Iz: Yes!

David: Ohhh.

Guiseppe: It's more than a tiebreaker. I think in the US you have the thing called a filibuster. When the conversations in the Congress go on and on and on and on. So the 49.3 is thought to avoid that, so if there's, "an obstructionism" is what they call it.

David: Oh I see I see. At least to my understanding it's more like an Executive Order, so that the President has some limited power to say, "You have to do this now and then we don't know how long it'll last. Maybe it'll go to the courts, and they'll shoot it down." But you can kind of implement this thing off the cuff without the legislature. 49.3, to my mind, is kind of like that. But I guess it's part of the Constitution.

Iz: I think it's part of the Constitution.

Guéric: What's new and very dangerous is that it's not only the quarante-neuf trois / 49.3, they used a series of articles that are written to help the government govern and take measures and help the legislative process. And the thing is they use four of them, four articles, there's 47.1-

David: I hadn't heard that.

Guéric: So it's not only they reduce the time MPs [members of Parliament] had to discuss the thing, and they reduced the possibility to object, they reduced the time, the conditions were just impossible for the opposition to have a valid and concrete response to that. It's this week the Constitution Council is supposed to examine the law in the process itself to see if it was unconstitutional or constitutional. The fact that they use four articles that have not been made to be used simultaneously. I think it sends a very, very dangerous message for the future governments that you can do that and not have any opposition at all. And I'm worried about right extreme right wing itself, especially.

Iz: I think I heard that the 49.3 was used 11 times since Marcon became president.

David: And before that, like, not at all?

Iz: I had never heard of 49.3 at all, and then the other day I was in the countryside, like deep in the countryside, and every sign someone had tagged on it 49.3, 49.3, 49.3.

David: Like the street signs?

Iz: The road signs. I was going from the station to where I was going, for a half hour every sign has been tagged 49.3, 49.3. This is something we had never even heard of before. That's just showing you how much it's been used, and how that really crystallized a lot of the anger.

One thing that I can say, before I was saying I went to his demonstrations, and they was so calm, and I was surprised. After the 49.3 was used, that changed.

I wasn't in Paris, so I can't talk for Paris, but in Marseille what I noticed was way younger people, a lot of the high school kids were there, a lot of university people were there. I noticed some stuff burning, which was not the case before. I was with my elderly mom so I didn't go and check things from too close, but there

was definitely fires in the background and stuff burning. I think there was a black bloc. And then in Paris, I don't know if some of you can talk about how it's been in Paris, but what I saw in the news was it was it became different after the 49.3.

David: I think that's right, tone changed after 49.3. I haven't been out to all the protests, I'm also keeping a distance from the really hot stuff, because I don't need any more trouble in my life. But there's definitely — I also don't have the context that you guys have because you're French, I haven't been here for that long. You guys grew up here — but there are big union-sponsored protests that are legal, permitted, announced in advance, in the middle of the day, and you have the unions with big box trucks with speakers blasting songs and people dancing, and giant inflatable things strapped to the top and banners and matching outfits. It's hundreds of 1000s of people, it's massive. That was what I started going out to, and there's people of all ages, just to check it out and see what's going on.

After 49.3 I feel like I started seeing a lot more, like, you would go to that and then after a few hours, as it got close to sort of its destination, maybe shit would start getting smashed, set on fire, you would see more younger people in black bloc,

kind of mingling with the crowd.

Iz: Which honestly, that is closer to the way demonstrations used to be.

David: I believe that

Iz: Demonstrations really used to be, in the past 15 years, big union demonstration, *cortège de tête*, which is the black bloc in France, and they're just like-

David: -which is amazing for me as an American. You guys have like, big legit permanent union back demonstrations, and then like, "Yeah, let's get the black bloc in the front."

[everyone laughs]

Iz: Yeah, but the unions hate the black bloc. So the thing, that if we start talking a bit more like riot porn, then, hearing stories, and people have told me that it's really much next level, , so it's very different. But so yeah, where we used to have those really organized union demonstration with a blank block in front and they're fucking shit up, out front. The union is not happy, and then sometimes they fight. And then it's over. And what we saw this time was big union protests, very common then 49.3 is being used... At the end of March and then it's not even part of the protest. It's in the evening. People meet and you have what we call manif sauvage.

David: Manif sauvage means wild protests, well, spontaneous protests,

Iz: and they just burn fucking everything.

David: They've block streets-

Iz: -they block the streets, they tag everywhere-

David: -there's a lot of trash, because there's been a garbage collector strike, that's over now, but I think it's supposed to pick back up again in a week. But there was a lot of trash on the street for a long time. And manif sauvage and the usual cortège de têtes, you would see a lot of people throwing trash cans, bags of trash and stuff that was piled up on the street in the middle of the road, along with like, rental bikes, and if there's construction equipment nearby they'll drag all that out in the street and block the flow of traffic, set stuff on fire.

Iz: I heard of black bloc or and the union clapping for them, which is something I had never heard of. The union usually beats the shit out of them, they fight. This time someone told me the union was clapping at them being "Yeah guys, go and destroy everything."

David: Yeah, people really don't feel that, like, even if you have stock, even if you have faith in the quote unquote "democratic system" it clearly hasn't been respected. And even if you're just looking at 49.3, I actually didn't know what you were talking about, about the other articles that were kind of piled on to really finesse the process, I didn't even know about that. Even the people who have some faith in the electoral system, as it exists, that's clearly just being clouded.

You hear a chant at the protests, nous aussi, on va passer en force and if I'm understanding that right it's a reference to Marcon just forcing it through. That means "we too, are going to force ourselves through". Force our way through. We too are going to just make it happen. We're just going to ram it through. And it's referring to the way that Marcon just kind of rammed it through.

Iz: I think something else that won the union's over was the police response also. Yeah, I've talked to people who have been in those kinds of demonstrations for years, and they said this is the most violent response they've seen, ever. I mean, we can talk about Sainte-Soline at some point as well, but yeah, I know people with PTSD from Sainte-Soline. I know people who have seen someone lose an eye in front of them. People who became deaf for a little bit because of what happened there. It's been absolutely insane, the police response.

TFSR: Could you say a few things about specifically what that escalation of violence from the police looks like? Speaking from personal experience, the only big demonstration I've ever been to was I went to May Day in 2018 in Paris, and I was "This tear gas is worse than stuff in the US!" And there was so many flashbangs and there was so much violence and it was the cortège de tête. Is the response that you're seeing now reflective of the police response during gilets jaunes but it's being seen by more people because the unions are drawing more people into the streets simultaneously? Or is it, or what does that escalation in violence look?

Iz: I can only talk in hearsay because I'm a good girl and I stay out of trouble.

Guéric: I been to a few marches and what I can say is that we talked about the black blocs which are the very specific way to demonstrate and to oppose a measure in very specific mode of action, but the thing is I have been shocked by the way police were charging everyone. We have we have grandpas and grandmas and little children — because it's the big crowd, like I said it's very it's a general position, a global massive opposition so we have every part of the population represented in it — and the police just being asked to charge and to scare people off or just beat them down. I just don't get it.

The last march I went to I think it was in March. The arrival point of the demonstration was in Place de l'Opéra and I mean they blocked every exit so we were turning around and just don't know what to do. And there was, four hundreds of people who didn't know what to do, there were maybe three or four people starting fires and shit and I was like "If I see them, why does the police not see them starting fires and stuff and go and arrest them? If they're the people who cause the problems?" But it was a free [searches for a word]. I don't know, they just let people panic and go around for maybe half an hour, and then they let people out. But it was too late because it fires were already started.

I'm very confused about what are the orders and what is the strategy here. I'm not even talking about the use of LBDs [lanceurs de balles de defense] and tear gas and very, very dangerous tough-

David: Lanceurs de Balles de Defense -sting balls, we call them "sting balls". The LBD's — if people don't know — is a really big, really fat rubber bullet. A lot of people have lost eyes to those. I think those came out in gilets jaunes. I don't know if that's when they first made an appearance, but I know that I've seen a lot of stuff around about people losing eyes to LBD's during gilets jaunes, but they're really big. I mean maybe two inches in diameter. So let's talk about that, actually, because I-

Iz: -I can't tell much about *le droit du travails* [the labor code protests] because I wasn't in France, but every one of my people I know who have told me about demonstrations have said that it's become much more violent after the le droit du travails which I think was in 2016.

David: I think it was 2016. So I've been trying to look this up because I didn't grow up here and I've been here for only a year and a half, like I said, le droit du travails the work law reform, I don't actually know what the crux of that issue was.

TFSR: Wasn't it about extending backwards the valid work age of youth?

Iz: No, what you were saying kind of makes me think of CPE which was in 2005, but I don't know. Yeah, after 2005 I'm not too sure because I wasn't in France anymore. But in 2005 there was CPE which was huge demonstrations, and I went to those. There were cortège de tête and there were the unions and there were a massive amount of people. I got tear gassed a bunch but it wasn't anything too crazy. And then my friends really told me while I was away from France-

David: [mimics playfully] -"no big deal, I got tear gassed a bunch." [laughs]

Iz: The cops are insane, they love tear gas. But all of my friends told me in 2016 that's when it became really crazy.

David: That's what I've heard. If we trace back to police response to big protests over the past — I guess that's seven, eight years ago now — le droit du travail, work law stuff in 2016, to my understanding, is when you first started seeing massive amounts of riot cops flooding the street and having this overwhelming numbers-based response to people in the street.

Iz: And those sting balls.

Guéric: And the Brav-M as well.

David: Brav-M came about in *gilets jaunes*. There's this elite motorized riot cop squad-

Iz: -it's not even a squad-

David: I think it's just a bunch of losers on motorcycles. They're a bunch of riot cops on motorcycles, and I guess somebody in the fucking drawing room at the cop headquarters figured out that a motorcycle helmet is basically a riot cop helmet, and was like "Well they don't need to take their helmets off. They can just sit on motorcycles and cruise around and show up and they can be this sort of lightning response to manif sauvage and things like that." So Brav-M...

Guiseppe: Brigade de répression de l'action violente motorisée...

Iz: They just wanted to say "brave".

[everyone talking at the same time trying to remember the dumb ass name of the loser cop brigade]

David: Yes, there's a couple of things. Their name is an acronym for the "mobilized brigade for the repression of violent action" — which is funny because they're extremely violent — and then it sounds like the word for "brave" in French. So it's a couple of things at the same time and everybody hates them. They came around in gilets jaunes they were created during gilets jaunes because that was such — to my understanding, wasn't here for it — a very spontaneous sort of wildcat movement that was popping up everywhere and there's a lot of property destruction and stuff.

Iz: Brav-M, it means something in France. It reminds people of cops that were called Les Voltigeurs.

David: What is that?

Iz: Les Voltigeurs were made, I'm gonna research the year because I'm not sure, so I'm sorry. There was actually a Netflix show about it.

David: About cops hitting people on bikes? [laughs]

Iz: No about Malik Oussékine.

TFSR: Was it like CHIPs? In the US there was a bad show in the 1980s about motorcycle cops in California. Was it just like that?

Iz: No. So 1986, there were cops on the motorbikes, they would come during riots. And then this guy called Malik Oussékine was killed by one of them. So there will be two people on a bike and one is driving and the other one is hitting people. So they killed someone, and then it became forbidden.

The Brav-M is literally that. So for French people it really means something. It's like, here's something that you made illegal in 1986 and now you're making it legal again, except you're just, it doesn't really have real existence. It's literally whatever riot cop is available at that time and whatever motorbike is available at that time, we're gonna put them on it, and they're gonna go and hit people. You're giving them a different name, and you're not making it a unit, but it's literally that thing that you made illegal 30 years ago.

Guiseppe: I think that Darmanin was this man was being targeted a lot in ministry is the Ministry of Interior-

Iz: -because he's a rapist.

Guiseppe: In the protests, he is this kind of figure that isn't afraid to say the most vile things on TV interviews and stuff. And I don't remember if it was actually him or another of his men, but when they were confronted exactly about this, Les Voltigeurs and the, I think, 22 year old person was killed in the '80s, they were be confronted about "Why'd you bring back that body of police?". He was like "No, it's completely different. That's a completely wrong comparison, because they cannot hit from the bike, they get off the bike and then they hit!"

Iz: They're supposed to get off the bike but they don't. We have so many videos on social media that shows that they do not get off the bike.

Guiseppe: To give you an idea when I first arrived to Paris I wasn't aware that the Brav-M had been reinstated, let's say, after gilets jaunes. One day I was just walking down the streets at night, and as you were explaining, because a manif sauvage just kind of happen so you don't know where they are, or like, where the police is gonna be. And the police presence in the city is insane, it looks like a war zone where you walk around and you don't feel safe. There's a classic thing like, when you see that

many cops you're like "Okay I'm gunna get hurt at some point."

Then you see the crowd come and it was the first time that I saw them and it was, to me, it was insane. There was maybe 40 bikes, big bikes, with two cops — and cops in France are fucking huge as well, I don't know why — and with these helmets, so their faces are completely covered. It just didn't feel like being in a democratic country or anything [laughs]. You see them sprint through the streets, 40 bikes with two cops each, so that's 80 policemen with batons and whatever other weapons they're carrying. And this is not an area that has been secluded for the manif... You're just walking on the street and then there's just 80 armed men on motorbikes. It just doesn't feel like they're protecting anyone's safety, of course, they're just serving a specific purpose, which is making stuff more violent.

Iz: And there was a lot of reports where it was just random people that were passing on the streets being like "Oh, yeah, I spent a whole day in jail. They beat me up, they arrested me. And then in the evening, when I say 'Can I please get some paper, some proof that I was there?' They said, 'No, you're just out.'" Those are the kinds of stories that you're hearing from just random people walking on the streets.

Guéric: I mean, we all heard the story of two Austrian high school students who were just taken to a police station because they were walking by while demonstration and they were just taken by the Brav-M.

Iz: Yeah no, there's tourists, people coming back from work, people parking their bicycle. They just take anyone and send them to jail. It's all about just scaring people.

Guéric: It's not only cops from Paris or Parisian region, they bring cops from every part of France, maybe people who are not trained or are unused to Paris and to the type of demonstration it is, and just thrown, newly...I don't know how to say this.

TFSR: Unprepared.

David: Yeah, just jump straight into it.

Guéric: How can we expect from them to be perfect and just to not panic and to not become violent as well. So it's a thing we have to think of, as well.

Iz: It's not just that, it's also the being justified in advance. We may mention a little bit more of Sainte-Soline, which is a different struggle but it's happening in France right now. And even before that massive demonstration in Sainte-Soline, Darmanin the rapist interior minister said "Be prepared, we are going to see violent scenes from Sainte-Soline." So even before it happens, you have an interior minister that saying "Be ready, you're gonna see videos of cops beating people up."

David: And then there's going to be criticism that, was it Darmanin that said "some people came to Sainte-Soline to wage war"?

Iz: Mhm, and called them "ecoterrorists".

David: And the response from the left has been "the people who wage war are the ones with weapons of war."

Guéric: And then they deny everything. That's the thing. They admit they're going to war and then they just said, "Okay. We do not hit people while riding bikes." But there are videos of it. It's the constant denying and the constant- if you're authoritarian, at least be honest about it.

David: I would honestly respect you more if you just told me.

Iz: It's just it's not even just denying it's straight up lying. After Sainte-Soline, two demonstrators are in a coma. People lost eyes, people have PTSD. I mean, it's really crazy what happened there. And the police released a statement saying that they have two or three cops — I don't remember, I think it was two cops — in critical condition, between life and death.

Those two cops came out of the hospital the following day. Tell me how are you in a critical condition one day, and the following day you're out of the hospital? This is a straight up lie.

TFSR: [sarcastically] It's a miracle.

Iz: If we say we have two demonstrators that got hurt, they said, "Well, we do as well." but it's a lie.

TFSR: Since it's been brought up a couple of times, people will be aware of the struggle against Cop City in the United States, with massive police repression in the streets as well as in the fields there. There's a long history of people, large groups of people in France defending ecologically sensitive areas, such as the zone à défendre (ZAD) — and actually a number of those spots around the country.

I wonder if someone could tell listeners a little bit about Sainte-Soline and the demonstrations that happened there. This is the second similar demonstration but with a much harder impact from the police this time, right?

Iz: Yes, I can talk a bit about some Sainte-Soline if you want but I've been talking a lot cause I'm a chatty Kathy.

David: A chatty Kathy and a good girl.

Iz: [laughs]

TFSR: These are going in your bio's in the show.

Iz: Just a little bit about the environmental context in France, climate change, yada yada. Because of climate change we have an issue with droughts every summer and

it's becoming worse and worse every summer. And so it's threatening agriculture. They found this thing that they call Mega Basin, which is artificial reservoirs — big holes, massive, we're talking kilometers long — and I don't like the idea of reservoir because it makes it seem like it's just collecting rainwater, but it's not just collecting rainwater.

It's also absorbing water from the ground, from the water table around it. It's fucking up all of the water that's in the soil around as well as collecting rainwater, and that they're giving it to agriculture, and they're really making you feel like "Oh, it's just those mom and pops, they're just those people working the land." No, it's just really, really big companies. It's intense agriculture, the crops that are just not sustainable. It's a whole system that needs to be changed. Instead of changing it, we're just saying we're going to create this massive reservoir depriving everybody else around from water and giving it to this small group of big companies.

There is one being built right now in this space called Sainte-Soline, and there has been a lot of demonstrations, some movement around it. The last one was two weeks ago and it was really advertised, we heard about it a lot. So a lot of people showed up. The organizers say about 30,000 people, the cop say 5,000 people or 6,000 people. Yeah, so I don't know, somewhere in between but nevertheless, a lot of people showed up. People with kids showed up, older people showed up, old school environments showed up. And then some people, they were ready to fight with the cops. And the response was just immediate violence from the police.

That is coming from people I know who have been to every violent demonstration there is in the past ten years, and they've told me, "I have never seen such a scene of violence. This is the most violent thing I've ever seen". A lot of people went to le droit du travails, they went to gilets jaunes and they say this is just absolutely crazy. The cops themselves say there's been about 5,000 stingers thrown and there were 6,000 people there. So you throw one stinger per person? That's crazy!

Guiseppe: And in the media there were some cops throwing grenades, and one of them was like "Woohoo!" That's the level of professionalism and training.

Guéric: I mean, the absurdity of it, they're protecting a hole in the ground. They put people in a coma, because they wanted to protect a hole in the ground.

Iz: And at this point they have spent more money defending the hole than building the hole. It's absolutely, it's completely absurd.

Guéric: If I may do the comparison with ecologist militants in Germany [at Lützerath]. They've been exposed to policy repression as well but it wasn't as violent. And the reason for it was — I mean, of course, it was not the obvious reason — but the government said it was to protect the protesters actually because they do haven't fully followed the laws. They found a way to make it sound reasonable. But it was certainly not as violent. But here in France we have a Minister who says "we are going to fight them, we're going to crush them down" and I'm like "who are you going to crush down?"

David: Yeah, I see more and more this language of "we must quell this rebellion" sort of feeling. "The police are standing between complete chaos from the mob", we've seen a lot of that rhetoric in the US in the past years as well.

Guiseppe: I think it's, as you're saying, it's a rhetorical move. So if you say "we want to crush them down" when you hear that, even unconsciously, you kind of believe that there's something that needs to be crushed down. And that some sicko

is trying to put up an irrational resistance with violent means.

I think this goes hand in hand with another thing that I've been hearing in the news, and even from French people that you meet at school or friends that you meet at the bar or whatever. Especially when the other protests are talked about on a daily basis, you hear people say "Well, but the cops must be stressed and tired". So there's also this gesture towards an understanding towards the cops that completely erases any form of understanding towards the protesters.

Since the beginning, you were saying, for example, you were talking about the nurses that have to end their years of work in sick leave. And the violence — that's violence that it extended over the years — but that is not acknowledged. That's someone who's irrational and needs to be crushed down if they process.

Iz: Also nurses are women, cops are men. There's sympathy that's given out to cops that isn't to nurses and teachers.

David: I do want to point out that I think that cops are being worn down by the protests, which is a good thing, and they should be worried and they should be stressed. That shouldn't evoke empathy for them because they shouldn't have their jobs and they shouldn't be out there facing off against the protesters for this call in particular. But I think it's important that — maybe they are tired, and, not that they would make great decisions if they weren't — but I think it's important maybe just to remind ourselves as a movement globally that we're having some effect, we're wearing them down, which is good. It shouldn't evoke empathy for them.

Oh, I want to say Sainte-Soline — for people listening in the States, which I guess is most people — I've been fascinated to see that there's actual coverage of this, front page coverage of the folks that were injured by the cops. Put into a coma

by the cops at Sainte-Soline in France.

In the States, we had protester killed by cops at Cop City pretty recently. You had to dig for that news. You had to go on, ItsGoingDown to find that news, go on Twitter or something. But if you just fire up your regular mainstream news feed you're not gonna see anything about cops killed anyone, a protest against cops city in Atlanta, or even about Cop City. Whereas here — it's refreshing, I mean, I think maybe this is me just being an American being over here and being kind of starry eyed about the fact that in France people tend to care more about things like human life versus property.

Iz: Yes, absolutely.

David: But it's cool, at the very least, that there is talk. I've seen a lot of headlines

like "Are the police out of control? They put two people in a coma to defend a hole in the ground", as you said. And that's just not a criticism that I would see in the mainstream news source in the US.

Guéric: In the same time from French mainstream news, you have a way of covering the demonstrations and covering the movement that is so confusing because of course they will show people lighting shops on fire and then throwing things out at the cops, but they're not showing on the national news the cops beating grandpa's down, beating just people holding signs on the ground.

If we want to see material, we have to go to the left wing press or even on the social networks, on unofficial videos just going on Twitter and Instagram. It should be covered equally, if you want to give a neutral view of it, at least a global view, just show everything. But they don't.

Iz: And I think it really is participating in this idea that Marcon is really disconnected. I was saying, many French people are asking "Why does he even want to pass this law?" and the response is "Because he is completely disconnected". And then you see the press showing the exact opposite than what social media is showing. So you have the population that's getting their news on social media and it's a completely different news than what they're seeing in the press. And then with Macron being a banker, then there's all these ideas of the press and Macron, and the bankers, they're all together, and we are the people...I don't know what I can kind of fueling those kinds of narratives.

David: I think so.

TFSR: I'd kind of like to ask a question in relation to this general trajectory. If you've got media representing, "Oh, the police are being tired down, the poor police, these are representatives of the working class" in France, and you've got this disconnected banker who "if only he wasn't there, or maybe he's personally manipulated or evil, but if we just replaced him then someone else would make a better decision," as opposed to the idea that there's this wider plan that you're seeing impacted in these different countries towards austerity.

Simultaneously, I saw some articles — sorry, this is kind of jumping a little bit — but there's an asylum and immigration law that's coming up that I know people are working up to try to address publicly. It feels like the public presentation of their being out of control protesters. And then at the same time, the idea that there's a drain on the social resources of the country, and our ability to pay for retirement for French people who have been fighting for and working all this time for retirement gives an awesome opportunity for the far right, and Marine Le Pen and I forget the name of the other asshole who was running for president. But these ideas around the great replacement have been a pretty common thing, and that fits really into the idea that people are coming in from outside, or they're undeserving internal elements that are making it so that this natural balance in the nation

where we could retire at a certain age is not available. I wonder if you could just sort of bounce off of that a little bit and see where that takes you.

David: Yeah, I'm gonna pass that but I just wanna make the connection for folks listening that the anti-immigration law is the "Darmanin Law", it's the rapist interior minister that we've been talking about. He keeps coming into this conversation, but he's behind this law I believe. He's kind of the architect of this. So okay, let's talk about the Darmanin anti-immigration.

Iz: I don't know enough to talk about it, I'm sorry.

Guéric: I mean, basically, this law, this project is just to make it more difficult for people to enter the country and become French.

David: Is it supposed to be more difficult to claim asylum?

Guéric: Yeah. So, I am a volunteer at an organization who fights against AIDS and part of the work we're doing is taking care of people who are coming through immigration and having to receive medical help to treat them regarding AIDS and hepatitis and everything. It's already very, very difficult because of the administrative procedures and everything, social services have basically no means. They have no money, they have no workers. It's dreadful for everyone. It's already very, very difficult and they want to worsen that? I just don't get it. If I were to make a connection with the pension reform, one of the argument they said was "there are going to be too many retirees, not enough workers." But if you let people come into the country and work and contribute to the system, it rebalances the whole thing.

David: It's pretty racially charged. I was gonna say it's really about not letting too many Black and Brown people into France, right?

Iz: Muslims.

David: Especially North African Muslims. Which is also an interesting dynamic because, France, I mean, do a little soul searching, you colonized a whole lot of North African countries for a very long time. I think you inadvertently have a link here, whether you like it or not.

Guéric: With this asylum and immigration I'm very worried. I don't know if it's part of it, but I think it's been discussed that we have some — I don't know the equivalent in English — but [says something in French]

Iz: Healthcare for foreigners?

Guéric: It's been discussed by the extreme right wing "Why do we have immigrants finding health care?". If it's not in this law I think it's just the thing following it. And I'm very, very worried about what it says about us as humans.

David: For sure. And I, honestly as a foreigner living here, I'd like to live here long term and I should care more about the Darmanin Law and pay closer attention. I feel like it's been eclipsed by a lot of other things and I'm just very busy personally, right now. And then what I have been going out to protest, I've been going to the pension reform stuff. But I've seen a lot of stuff about the Darmanin Law around. I mean, I'm no fool, I know how the creep works. They start with one thing and the next they start taking health care away from all foreigners living in France. And, like I said, I'm a foreigner living in France and I have healthcare. And I like it. I've used it several times.

Iz: Yeah. I don't think the Darmanin Law is going to get as many people in the street as the retirement reform.

David: Yes. Unfortunately, yeah.

Iz: You hope it would but I don't think it will. One thing I've seen that I thought was really interesting in Marseilles, in Marseilles a lot of things are just glued on the street, on the walls.

David: Wheat pasted?

Iz: Yeah, wheat pasted. And I saw a lot of demonstrations against the Darmanin Law that were in Arabic, in English and in different languages. I thought that was interesting. It's not the big unions that are organizing. It's very much small grassroots organizations are organizing around it.

David: Yeah, that's unfortunate. But I've seen organizing against the Darmanin Law for a long time now. I mean, that was I think already in the works in the fall? Last fall, maybe, I started to see stuff around here. I mean in the 20th arrondissement [district] in Paris, I see a lot of pro-immigrant and immigrant solidarity stuff here. There are a lot of grassroots organizations that have a little HQ where they run different campaigns and run different services out of, and I started to see posters going up, I think last fall, yeah, against the Darmanin Law. I didn't really pay much attention. Now I'm starting to pay more attention.

It is interesting. I know there are a number of accounts I started to follow on Twitter, French protest news coverage accounts, and they started including more Darmanin stuff in their coverage, mostly pension reform stuff. But I started to see more and more Darmanin stuff after a big protest against the Darmanin Law at some point in the past couple of weeks, since things have really heated up with the pension reform law.

It seems to me at least the awareness is growing, maybe the coverage is blending and I think that's coming to some sort of inflection point soon, the Darmanin Law. Yeah. I don't understand the French legislative process super well, I don't know if that needs to be voted on. I wish I knew. But I think that has an important day coming up, the Darmanin Law. And maybe that's increasing attention as well. So it's definitely out there.

Iz: This guy Darmanin is at the intersection of many of our struggles.

David: If listeners need to take one thing away it's that Darmanin is not a nice guy. I think he controls my visa [everyone laughs].

Iz: March 8 is the big Women's International Day and so there was big protests and Darmanin definitely, a lot of chance we're being adapted so that we could put Darmanin in there.

David: [chanting in French] "Dar-ma-nin, ass-ass-in!"

TFSR: I expect him to run for president next then?

Iz: Absolutely, he will. The only question, is he gonna run for Macron's party, or is he gonna run for Le Pen's party? Because it's literally the same policies that he's pushing.

David: I think a lot of people have been — perhaps this is unwarranted — but a lot of people have been surprised at how far to the right Macron actually is. I mean, maybe it's easy to say, "I told you so, could have seen that coming". I don't know. But he seems to me — not living here at the time he was first elected, not paying super close attention — he seems to me like a center, maybe slightly left of center sort of Obama guy with very progressive rhetoric and very centrist policies. And he's been pretty conservative and even far right on some things.

Iz: It's a big fight I have been having with my mom, because I was living in the US when Trump was elected. And I saw people around me really being affected, and myself being affected by some of Trump's policies. So when a few months later, I had to either vote or not vote between Macron and Le Pen. I went out and I voted, and I voted for Macron. And I did it last time as well.

I know many people will disagree with me on that, and I'm starting to disagree with myself on that. But if you ask me to choose between Le Pen and Macron, I will choose Le Pen. So I'm having a lot of fights with people about that, because "Well, you voted for him" and I'm like "Well I voted for him on the second round so that it would avoid a fascist".

TFSR: Yeah, you went to the polls two times a year to to mark a thing. What are you doing the rest of your time? If all that you're doing is saying "Macron is going to solve the problems" and going home then there's some stuff to think about.

Iz: Yeah, yeah. And it's also, what I tell people is, have you lived four years under Trump? Are you looking at your country after Trump was the president of it? Because I'm looking at the US right now and I left the US. And the US is also my country, I am a citizen of the US. And I left because I don't like what Trump has done with the place. I don't like what Macron is doing right now.

That is actually something we have not talked about the Rassemblement National, it's still called the National Front-

David: - the Le Pen, basically, family party that was the National Front for years, and they rebranded, as far right organizations tend to do, as the National Rally in 2018-2019. Same party.

Iz: The National Front had been really quiet about the retirement reform. We have not seen them in protests, which is good. Not saying they shouldn't be there. But we haven't really heard them, that much about it. They made it clear that they were going to vote against the reform but that's it.

I think that is one of the reasons that Macron is being unchallenged, on the one side you have leftist parties, and then on the other side, you have Le Pen's party. And they're all at the National Assembly but they're not united against Macron.

Guéric: And what really, tremendously worries me is that during all this month of debating and discussing the law — and you're right, the National Front was very, very silent about it — if some of them opposed the law they did it in a very, very silent way, a subtle way. And the government portrayed — especially the extreme left and left wing — as dangerous, as not authorizing the legislative process to happen as it's supposed to happen. Out of all of this I think the extreme right just looks respectable, looks decent.

I think before that we have more and more people voting for the extreme extreme right, and the National Front, because they think everyone else has done the time and proved that they were efficient, so why not vote for the extreme right? And then, right now, it's going to draw more people in thinking, "Well, maybe it's decent, it's correct, it's respectable to choose them because they look-" [struggling to find the right English words] I don't know how to finish [laughs]

TFSR: "They weren't burning trash in the street", for instance.

Guéric: Yeah, exactly. And the thing is extreme right, small groups of fascists groups in demonstrations, they do that stuff. But the press doesn't portray them, the government doesn't talk about them. When the government decides, "Okay, this organism or this association, this organization needs to be terminated". It's rarely, it's been the case, but it's rarely for an extreme rights organization. I just think it gives an avenue, a boulevard for some right politicians to come and say, "Well, you haven't tried us". We know they're gonna use the same methods, even worse, and I am just worried. I'm very, very worried about that.

TFSR: Yeah, I know it's a bit out of the range of what we've been talking about, but last year the government was actively attempting to destroy antifascist groups in Lyon, right?

David: Actually it's directly relevant to what Guéric was just talking about. A lot of that was written in the 1930s to give the government the power to order groups

to dissolve order groups, you're not allowed to exist as an organization anymore, you can't advertise, you can't hold meetings, whatever. It was, designed to combat right wing organizations. It's almost 100 years old, the law that they used to break up GALE, Le Groupe Antifasciste Lyon et Environs (GALE). So that's Antifa

Group Lyon and Surrounding Area.

Lyon also has a huge fascist problem, there's a lot of back and forth between far right and far left in the streets and in a lot of other ways. The government ordered GALE, the antifa organization, the largest one in Lyon, to dissolve. They actually appealed and won, which is great. They're still around doing good work in Lyon. They actually prosecuted and they all struck out twice because they were charging seven activists from GALE with some pretty serious assault charges for a brawl that broke out at a protest with some Catholic nationalist activists, and they were facing up to two years, and they all got off, which is great.

So, GALE is going strong, untouchable, but yes. The government used that law that Guéric: was just talking about to order them to dissolve. There's, to my understanding, there's no impossibility that something like that happens again.

Guéric: We we're talking about Sainte-Soline, and the government decided to dissolve-

[everyone starts talking all at once]

David: A green militant organization. It's called Soulèvements de la Terre "The Uprising of the Earth" is what it's called. And it's a large eco-defense group.

Iz: It's not one group, it's a conglomerate of groups.

David: Oh, it's like a network, like an umbrella. Okay, so the government ordered them to dissolve. And I guess that's playing out in courts right now.

Guéric: I mean, why? Just "Why?"

David: Also, ordering a group to dissolve in and of itself is kind of questionable at best. I mean, people will just reform under a different name.

Guéric: I don't want to throw Guiseppe under the bus but I was worried about Italy, and how was it before the conservatives extreme right were elected, and if you remember hearing, or seeing, the left wing opposition being silence or being-

Guiseppe: - in the build up to the election of the right wing party. I mean, it was very different from the situation here, because already at the level of grassroots organizing and protests, France is in a very different place, compared to the earlier, we were talking about Italy having just also announced the reform law that cuts pensions in some form. And today, I was looking at my Twitter and the main union guy said, "Oh, they want to do this, we're not going to stop the protests". And most people commenting, leftists, they were like "What protests? You've done nothing".

It's very different from here. And it's been different for years.

Then at the governmental level of the parliament, we don't really have a left wing party anymore. So in France, you have Mélenchon's party, which is the Communist Party, right?

Guéric: No, no, no, exactly. But I think that's half of it...

Guiseppe: If they asked him what he is, he will say he's a communist, no?

Iz: No. Socialist maybe, but not a communist.

Guiseppe: OK. But anyway-

[everyone starts talking to each other and over each other]

Guiseppe: In Italy what we have is the Democratic Party — named the Democratic Party out of the fetish that we have in Italy towards the US-

Iz: -oh yeah?

David: Really? Come on, man. [laughing in disbelief]

Guiseppe: In the offices of the Democratic Party, when Biden was elected people had pictures of Biden and Kamala, like "We love him!" It's terrible. But this is in Italy, that's the most "left" party that gets votes. They make laws against immigration, they protect the interest of capital, rather than instead of work.

TFSR: It's like the Democratic Party in the US.

Iz: Exactly, exactly. Here's the problem: in France, there's Mélenchon and then there's six other parties that are also far left. Those votes get divided, and then they never win.

David: Even when they had the Nupes? Is the Nupes, does that still exist? Or was it only for the President?

Guéric: It's official, it's not a party. They formed at the National Assembly to have more weight in the votes.

David: I just think it's interesting. Especially, it'll be interesting for American listeners, like, we have this binary system. there's Republican, Democrat and then not much else.

Iz: Nader. [everyone laughs]

David: Ralph Nader? Yeah, when I was a kid.

TFSR: The Green Party and The Libertarians are basically it.

David: Everyone that's for the left and center left came together in a push to make Mélenchon Prime Minister, is that right?

Iz: Yeah, yeah.

David: In the legislative elections, not the presidential elections, but the parliamentary elections which followed a few months later.

So Macron won the presidential election, and you know they have both the President and the Prime Minister in France, there was this huge push to make Mélenchon — who is the guy we were just talking about who is far left in some important ways a figurehead in mainstream politics in France. There was this push to make him Prime Minister — that failed — but to do that, because the left is so fractured, they had to create a coalition of all these small parties. And even then they didn't get all of the parties on the left on board. It was this whole effort to create this label, create this coalition.

Mainstream electoral politics for the left here are pretty screwy. Whereas people talk about the "Le-Penization of opinion", where Marine Le Pen's talking points, especially about xenophobia have...she has been able to, with increasing success, position herself as just French, and beyond the dialogue of right and left. Right?

[speaking to the room] French people, help me out.

[everyone laughs]

Guéric: I don't want to go over all the topics we discussed today, but there's also this movement of the government, the neoliberal government, taking elements of language from the extreme right, and ideas and just implement them in their own way. But it's just blurring all limits and barriers between right and center. In everyday conversations, ideas of extreme right just seem normal, just seem trivial. It's dangerous. It's in the language, the discourse, it's in the ideas, it's in the measures, it's in the police response we discussed, it's basically everything. So I will leave France, right now. I'm leaving France.

David: Really?

Guéric: No. [laughs] But it is worrying.

TFSR: We're seeing similar things being reflected in a lot of countries simultaneously. When you were talking about the motorcycle police being brought back together, I was thinking of the MAT [Monades Apokatastasis Taksis, aka Units for the Reinstatement of Order] forces in Greece, the motorcycle riot police.

I know that there's been massive labor demonstrations in a number of places around Europe this last year, which is really inspiring. Similar

things to the immigration and asylum law sound like they're happening — or at least the the repercussions of it, like in the UK right now — basically Sunak, saying, "If you've come here in an undocumented way we're going to kick you out", which is the same thing that happens in the US too. So it's not like this country is doing it any better.

I think that there's a lot to sort of wrap up. I think that there's a lot of inspiration to be taken from the amount of resistance that people have been engaging in France, around issues of ecological devastation, and around issues of stealing of your energy and the stealing of the last years of your life, or later years of your life, and the pleasure and joy of life.

I wonder if you have any last words about if you think that the demonstrations can continue? Do you think that they'll be successful? Or

do you have any things that you're hoping to see come out of this?

Iz: I think my final words would be: it's part of our culture.

[everyone yells "eeeeeeyyyy"]

I'm not an especially chill kind of person but demonstrations, that's part of a culture. Not giving a fuck about work and enjoying our life and spending time with people as being more important than working in making money, that is part of our culture. The welfare state, the retirement system, comes from what happened after the Second World War when the resistance organized this government that I'm critical of, as well, but they are the ones that came up with all of those ideas. And little by little, this neoliberal Macron is coming and just taking piece by piece of everything. This is our way of showing that we're still resisting against that. And that's it, I'm done. [everyone laughs]. Mic drop.

Guéric: As a French person I can say if people in the UK or in Germany or in every where else in the world just take inspiration from what we are doing, I mean, I'm proud. If we can help people in France and everywhere else to understand that any citizen can be part of the opposition, can be part of expressing something to help the democratic way of living, still going on, I mean I am for it.

Even if the demonstrations at the moment are not focused on the same things — I think in the UK it's about the inflation at a more general level, and in France it's the pension reform — in the demonstrations we see signs and we see people advocating for more global things: inflation, the environment, the social services...

I don't know about not giving a fuck... We have to preserve this way of not accepting and not caring about what the government does, and if it can lead to more actions, I don't know, petitions and action in voting...I just hope it won't stop at demonstrations and wrecking havoc in the streets, but just becoming part of the process.

Guiseppe: Yeah, I don't have that much to add. As a foreigner, seeing, for example, the way that the protests has been received in Italy, it's definitely been a hugely inspiring for people. And I've heard people that are far from radical and have never been to demonstrations admiring all the way that the French people have gone to

the streets and responded to the law.

I think, in a sense — before Guéric was talking about the way that, for example, right wing concepts are being trivialized and made normal, and enter the political language — I think in a sense, and this goes back to what we're saying about the trajectory, if there's a trajectory to words, countries, governments becoming more right wing and being more authoritative, just making laws with the 49.3 system, we have to find a counter trajectory. Which means that anytime that something happens, it doesn't just happen, people go into the streets and they make it difficult.

Sometimes you may win, sometimes you may lose, but it's not something that you can decide or evaluate like "Oh, the law passed in the end so this meant nothing". Of course it meant so much, think of all the young people that were in the street, what they're gonna grow up to be, what they're going to think about their country. The people abroad that see that this can happen, and this can be done. So I think it's huge and it really then connects to more global issues, because we're gonna have to be in the streets a few years from now, or tomorrow, really, about the climate. That this is happening in a country like France that definitely has a lot of media attention is great.

David: Yeah. I don't have much to add, I just, I love that the French are willing to throw down for this stuff. I know that there's been a lot of buzz among American lefties on social media, or whatever, about "The French are doing it right. The French are showing us how to do it".

You and I were talking about this, Giuseppe, you reported an occupation at your school and you're like "I see people that I know, for a fact, did not even stop by the occupation. And they're tweeting 'yeah, the French are doing!'" But I say "You have to be the French protester you want to see in the world..." [laughs]

It's impossible to take up every cause and put your energy everywhere. I think that culturally Americans are much more susceptible to be guilt tripped about not wanting to work as much for example, whereas in France people are like "The fuck you talking about? Life is for living." I think it's a really important aspect of French culture that I appreciate. I do hope they win.

Iz: You do work too much to be a real French person [everyone laughs].

David: I do work too much. And I'm a freelancer, and a student! [laughing continues]

Iz: You;re not even making money off of it!

David: I'm not!

TFSR: We call it the grind in the US. [more laughing]

David: Yeah, the grind. I'm on my hustle. [surprise, more laughing].

Iz: Chill man, come on.

David: Well, I guess we're almost done with his interview so on that note.

TFSR: Well, this was actually a long intervention. [laughs] Thanks for having this conversation, all of you.



The Final Straw is a weekly anarchist and anti-authoritarian radio show bringing you voices and ideas from struggle around the world.

You can send us letters at: The Final Straw Radio PO Box 6004 Asheville, NC 28816 USA

Email us at:

thefinalstrawradio@riseup.net or thefinalstrawradio@protonmail.com

To hear our past shows for free, visit: https://thefinalstrawradio.noblogs.org

To support transcription and zine-making efforts which are funded by donations, visit:

https://thefinalstrawradio.noblogs.org/donate/ or via Patreon:

https://www.patreon.com/tfsr or via LiberaPay, which does not take a cut of the payments:

https://liberapay.com/The-Final-Straw-Radio/